STAT

TIME INTERVIEW

'It's Maddening and Frustrating'

William E. Colby had just returned from Richard Welch's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. Still dressed in a somber charcoal gray pin-stripe suit and dark tie, the CIA Director held a 90-minute interview with TIME *Correspondent Strobe Talbott. Colby's successor-designate, George Bush, is expected to be confirmed by the Senate shortly after Congress reconvenes next week. Soon after that Colby will retire, ending a quarter-century in the CIA. In the excerpts, Colby gives his personal views on a number of issues involving the record of the CIA and its proper role in a democracy.*

Q. ***How did you enter intelligence work?***

A. My intelligence career started during World War II with the Office of Strategic Services. Two Frenchmen and I went into France to help organize, arm and supply the Maquis [France's anti-Nazi Resistance fighters]. I also went up to [Nazi-occupied] Norway with a small team. We operated on our own up in the hills, coming down to blow up railroad lines.

After the war I wandered off into the law business [practicing with OSS Chief William ("Wild Bill") Donovan's firm in New York]. When the Korean War came along I went back into intelligence. The cold war was very much with us. A lot of people thought this was the precursor to another overall war.

I went to Sweden and then to Italy, where I focused on Italian politics: the rise of the Communist party, the opening to the left during the '50s. It was a kind of a postgraduate course. Frankly, I think good covert operations well handled, well timed, can solve a problem at an early stage while it's still small.

Q. ***Did you and many of the other people of your generation who went into the CIA tend to think of yourselves as liberals?***

A. I considered myself an ideological liberal. Remember, the biggest enemy the Communists had were the liberals, not the conservatives. After World War II, the Communists were out to secure a monopoly on the left wing.

COLBY (IN RAINCOAT) AT WELCH'S FUNERAL

continued

Q. ***Was there much agonizing then over the contradictions between the needs of a secret agency and the principles of a liberal democracy?***

A. No. That was a much simpler time. Into the '60s there was a total consensus throughout most of American society about what needed to be done. Read the Kennedy inaugural. There's not much agonizing there about how far you go to protect liberty in the world: you had to go any distance and fight any foe. We had a major adversary in the Communist world. [There was] a clear feeling that [Communist expansion] was the wave of the future.

The whole thought process about intelligence was different. You were given guidelines and told to go do what had to be done. Congressmen didn't look into it; they expected you to go do it and not bother people with the details. In the process we made some mistakes, sure, but I don't think very many in our 28-year history.

Q. ***What has been your personal attitude about American agencies keeping tabs on Americans?***

A. Having lived around the world and being accustomed to having my phone tapped, I don't get emotional about it. Of course, if it's illegal, we're not going to do it, but I don't get horrified, say, at the idea of someone reading my mail. We don't want a secret-police society, and our laws, our Congress, have set out the kind of society we want.

Q. ***What was the result of the Bay of Pigs fiasco?***

A. I believe if [the covert war against Cuba's Fidel Castro] had succeeded, it would have avoided the Cuban missile crisis, which is the nearest the world ever got to Armageddon. I'm among those who believe the Bay of Pigs failed because we made a tactical mistake: we didn't read our intelligence properly; we thought there was going to be an uprising, and there wasn't enough evidence for that conclusion.

Having failed, the Bay of Pigs led to a decision to get the CIA out of large operations and give them to the military. I believe the U.S. Government needs an ability to conduct large, unattributed, unadmitted operations. Otherwise we're in a position of either having to complain with a diplomatic protest and be ignored, or having to threaten to use military force, which nobody wants to do.

Q. ***Did the post-Bay of Pigs decision to take foreign operations away from the CIA and turn them over to the military contribute to the American involvement in the Viet Nam War?***

A. When they turned [operations] over to the military approach, the critical political factor was extracted. It wasn't until 1967 that we really began to work seriously on the "people's war." Until then, nobody had done anything about winning the war in the villages.

America got into Viet Nam and then decided that there are some things we can't do. Well, I think we didn't do it right. But I think we could have done it.

Q. ***The war ended in defeat for the U.S. In your opinion, was there any sense in which the U.S. succeeded in Viet Nam?***

A. The military equation didn't work. But we won the people's war. By 1972 and 1975 there weren't any true guerrillas in Viet Nam. The people were all on the government's side. The Communist victory in Viet Nam was no more a result of a guerrilla war than was the Nazi victory in France or Norway.

Q. ***Both here and abroad, many people consider the CIA an international murder incorporated. How much killing have you seen in your career?***

A. It's maddening and frustrating that so many people associate the CIA with dart guns and toxin and assassinations. Just look at the assassination report by Senator Church's committee, a six-month study, and you'll find that over a 25-year period we tried to get rid of two people [Castro and the Belgian Congo's Patrice Lumumba], and we didn't assassinate either of them. The dart gun wasn't used. As for the Phoenix operation in Viet Nam [a controversial counterterrorist operation Colby ran], the figure of 20,000 people killed is often used. Well, that's my figure, and I'm the one who put it out. But that was part of war.

Q. ***What worries you about the current controversy over CIA operations and foreign policy in general?***

A. I'm concerned that the present period has strong similarities to the 1920s and early 1930s. Just as events in Manchuria in the early 1930s seemed very far away then, there are some that seem far away now. There's a revulsion against involvement overseas because of the mistakes of our latest war. This kind of turning away is dangerous, I think. I'm not saying things are going to fall apart. I'm fundamentally optimistic —maybe sometimes a little overly so.

Q. ***Is there anything about the past year that encourages you?***

A. Yes. America has brought the analysis function of intelligence to the highest level it has ever reached. This country has brought about a total revolution in the technological components of intelligence.

Furthermore—and this is a real first —America has brought intelligence under the Constitution. That's not true of any other country. Most countries operate somewhere out on the edges. I'm convinced it's possible to run a secret agency as part of a constitutional society.

Q. ***Has the CIA been forced to change because of détente?***

A. No. We welcome détente. The more freely information flows, the less we have to scramble for it, the better. I was introduced to Mr. Brezhnev in 1973. He said, "Oh, so this is the head of the CIA. He must be a dangerous man." I replied, "Mr. General Secretary, the more we know about each other, the safer we all will be." He didn't answer.

Q. ***Do you have any regret about leaving the CIA now?***

A. No. I think it's a good idea to have a new face. That may get people thinking more about the future. You see, I have to identify my career with the whole of the agency back through the years. Mr. Bush doesn't. When someone comes up with a horror story about 1948 or 1952, he can say: That's all in the past; let's look to the future.

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